

Sermon for 24th January 2010
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
(1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13, Luke 4:21-30)

I heard of someone who went into the Post Office before Christmas and asked for 50 stamps. 'What denomination madam?' asked the Post Office clerk. The lady gave a deep sigh and said, 'Why do they have to bring religion into everything? Alright, I'll have 30 Baptist and 20 Methodist.'

It's the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and we have been praying this week for greater unity in the Church. And that we will heed St Paul words in today's reading from Corinthians, that the Church is one Body, with Christ at it's Head (Coloss 1:18). To echo the cry of the psalmist, 'how long, O Lord, how long?' ... will the Church allow herself to be torn apart by theological debates and petty disagreements. Despite all we have to unite us we continue to bicker. Mostly it's polite, but it's still bickering. And it's not only between denominations that there is disunity, it happens within churches too. We're called to live together in love, as the Body of Christ, and that's the very thing we find hardest to do. Perhaps Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another because he knew that a time would come when they couldn't stand the sight of each other. Not much has changed. Loving one another in this glorious muddle that we call the Church is still the greatest challenge we face.

We work together in Burghfield with other Christians as TIM (Together in Mission) and Churches Together, on things like the May Fayre and the Carols on the Hatch; and we worship together from time to time, like we will tonight at St John's Mortimer. That's a witness to people out there that there's something in what we're saying about Jesus, because our faith in him is what brings us together. Because when all people hear about us is our arguments they are confirmed in their suspicion that the church is full of hypocrites and we have nothing of value to say to the world. That is, of course, nonsense, but that's what people out there think about us too much of the time.

Yes, of course, there's huge difference and diversity in the worldwide Church - there's even huge difference and diversity within this particular church of St Mary. And that's the beauty and the richness of it, so let's enjoy it and celebrate it instead of continually moaning that everyone should think what we do and behave like we do. What a boring time we'd have if that was actually the case. I can't express it any better or more vividly than St Paul. We'd be in a right state if the Church was all eyes, or all ears, or all right legs. If we were in that state we could say, Aye, aye, what's this ear then. Hop on. But we'd be no good for anything real. We are different. That's how God made us, that's how God called us. Let's get on with it. That's what St Paul is saying, rather more eloquently than me: "God has so arranged the body ... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

I once heard it explained very simply and profoundly by a priest in a lively evangelical church not very far from here. One of the older members of his congregation asked if they could sometimes sing some traditional hymns and his response was, 'Yes, of course, we'll have a Songs of Praise, because if we love each other, we'll sing each other's songs.' That's what it comes down to, if we love each other as members of the same Body, we'll give way on what we want and what makes us feel comfortable so that we can help make someone else feel happier.

In the church audit many of you completed before Christmas, which we did alongside other churches in the area, I was struck that all sorts of people in this church are helped in worship by hugely different things. There are people in this church who are very traditional, while others are very progressive; some are Anglo-Catholic, liking smells and bells, sung psalms and canticles, and others who are charismatic evangelical who want to pray in tongues and share words of power. And there are the vast majority of us who are somewhere in the middle, or who are not really that bothered how we worship, as long as we worship. And by and large we do love each other and co-exist as part of the Body of Christ here in Burghfield.

Yes, of course we get up each others noses at times - we're human. But if you're worried about our disagreements, take a look at today's gospel. Jesus really wound them up the day he read from the scroll of Isaiah. He stopped reading too soon and left out the part about the suffering of God's people and the delights God has in store for them, and so all the emphasis of the passage fell on him. 'What arrogance', they thought. Even so, reacting by trying to kill him was rather extreme. It's not often that our reactions to each other go that far. Yes, we get it wrong sometimes. But for the most part we love each other and bear with each other as fellow members of the Body of Christ.

So keep up the good work. And on the days when you're finding someone or something particularly irritating, or you really want things your own way, remember that this Body is not a democracy, it's a theocracy. We're not the head, Jesus is. It doesn't matter how we like to worship, or even what we find helpful; worship is for God, not for us. And the thing God wants most from us is not great worship, it's love for him and for each other. And if we can't love one another who we can see, how can we possibly love God who we can't see?

We are the Body of Christ. I pray to God that we in the Christian Church, and we in St Mary's Burghfield, will stop focusing on our differences and just get on with loving one another, to the glory of God. Amen.

Blessings
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